The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 43 AUGUST 21st, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,—

One of the perennial problems of Christian thought is that of the different, and often conflicting claims of liberty and order ; sometimes between liberty and social justice. The difficulties of the problem are never more acute and perplexing than at a time like the present. When a nation is engaged in a vital struggle which revives the sense of community, social injustice is more patent and more intolerable, and demands control of the actions of some in the interests of all. At the same time our jealousy for our liberties, our fear of falling into the same servitude as that imposed by the régime against which we fight, becomes more sensitive. It is never easy to determine what are essential liberties, what are relative, and what are merely licence and indulgence: circumstances will alter our classifications. The fear of anarchy, or the fear of tyranny, may drive us to extremes in turn. A case in point is the outcry against the use of investigators (the so-called "snoopers") by the Ministry of Information—a form of enquiry which, in any case, does not appear to have been introduced by the present Minister. Whether the methods are right, and the results useful, ought to be the subject of dispassionate examination. I have not seen either the methods or the purpose seriously criticised ; but the Ministry has been the object of a clamour which would give the impression that it was endeavouring to set up a Secret Police.

The insistence of the problem of freedom led me to give close attention to Sir Norman Angell's recent Penguin pamphlet, *Why Freedom Matters*. To deal with the subject in 134 pages, Sir Norman wisely limits the terms of reference. He restricts himself to the "fundamental and supreme freedom"—that is, "the freedom to know, freedom of thought, of opinion, of discussion ; free access to the raw materials of thought and discussion, to knowledge, particularly to knowledge of the facts relative to policies pursued by governments ; freedom to know what our rulers are doing with our lives ; freedom to discuss the facts in speech and print ; the freedom described by Milton as 'the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely, according to conscience, which is above all liberties.'"

Such sentiments are unexceptionable ; but they are not easy to apply. The universal accessibility of knowledge (by which the author appears to mean information) takes for granted a public, not necessarily of saints, but at least of Sir Norman Angells, who have highly trained minds. Knowledge requires a knower, as well as facts to be known: the question of the supply of knowers implies the whole problem of education. The problem of "freedom of thought" is related to the problem of how to provide people who can think freely—and wisely. That is an educational problem: but the first problem of education is that of what rights should be conceded to, and what duties imposed upon parents ; and this is also the first problem of freedom.

This is not to say that I do not agree with the general tenor of Sir Norman Angell's argument in favour of free speech. But a Christian argument would have to take into account a great deal that Sir Norman does not treat; such as the problems of education and parental rights and responsibilities, just mentioned. And if it did not go so far as that, it would confine itself to particular liberties, and content itself with saying: here and here liberty is being infringed, let us defend it.

THE DISMISSAL OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

Let us consider a particular problem of freedom and order. In our Letter No. 41 the Editor commented upon the action of the City Council of York in terminating the engagement of all City employees who have declared themselves to be conscientious objectors. We should add that a strong letter of protest against this action appeared in the *Yorkshire Evening Press* of August 2 over the signatures of eleven Free Church ministers of that city. Such a statement is very welcome.

Nevertheless, there is one possible source of ill-feeling against conscientious objectors, which ought to be discussed freely, in order that it may not gain volume in subterranean channels. To several of our correspondents it appears unjust that able-bodied objectors of military age should remain in their peace-time employment, under the same conditions and enjoying the same income, while their contemporaries are being enlisted into new and often uncongenial services at meagre rates of pay and at risk of life. Such an inequality will no doubt be a greater grievance to the families of the men in the services than to the men themselves: the womenfolk may have bitter daily reminder of the difference in their situation and that of their children, from that of the families of the conscientious objectors. Such considerations may have influenced the members of the York City Council, and led them, in the attempt to remove one injustice, to commit another.

As for the financial inequality, it might be possible to remedy that by continuing the objectors in their posts at a reduced wage for the period of the war, making allowance for any higher scale of living, than that of a private soldier, which their several employments imposed: this again would only be fair if the difference in their salaries were not retained by their employers (whether private or public corporations), but allocated to some public cause. As for conscientious objectors over military age, I take it that their opinions, so far as they keep them to themselves, and cannot be found guilty of trying to excite disaffection, are their own business. As for those of military age, who have been exempted by a tribunal, and unless they are such persons and in such positions that they are likely to do harm, there is nothing whatever to be said for dismissing them. On a lower level than that of pure justice, it may be deprecated as doing harm to our national reputation for tolerance and generosity; on a lower level still, at a time of extreme national effort, it is nonsensical to eject men from jobs where they are useful, and cast them out for public assistance or starvation.

It is well also if we can see the problem of justice as between conscientious objectors and those who accept the obligation of military service, in a larger context of social justice. "To each according to his need," *The Times* has recently reminded us, is an old motto; and the larger question (especially insistent in a time of national emergency) is how far inequalities of income should be allowed, except so far as they represent inequalities of need and inequalities of service to the cause of the nation and of humanity. There is at least one kind of injustice which should, I think, be agreed about by all members of the community whatever their other convictions,

and that would be the injustice of anyone's being allowed to accumulate a fortune out of business arising directly from the war.

THE TRIBUNALS

The tribunals have a very difficult task, and however precisely the law was defined, the important qualifications for those who sit upon them would still be sympathy and understanding, the ability to respect sincerity as well as the ability to unmask fraud. Laxity is to be deprecated, but the influence of public opinion should be exercised to restrain justices from harassing the inarticulate applicant, from preaching sermons, or from exhibiting temper. A judge at one tribunal said to an objector: "The room will be the pleasanter for your leaving." We have more sympathy for a worried judge in another city, who complained that the applicants "go off into a series of mental processes"—a form of seizure perhaps unknown on that bench. When the applicant is a Christian, he and the bench should, and often do, receive the assistance and counsel of his clergyman or minister.

THE INTERNEES

While the universal protest against the scandals connected with internment, and the Government's immediate response to public opinion, are gratifying symptoms, we cannot allow the whole problem of internment and deportation to be considered as one which has been settled once for all. We must remember that harm has been done which will take time to right, and some grievous harm that can never be put right. It is not merely a question of releasing those whom the nation could use, but all those, useful or not, who are not the nation's enemies; and not merely a question of releasing them, but of releasing them for something better than starvation. An understanding of their position is not yet universal. A letter which we have from a correspondent who had been interned and released is very temperate and reasonable in tone, and does not complain of ill-treatment, but suggests that some of the officers in the camp laboured under elementary misconceptions, implying a still deeper misunderstanding of the nature of this war. One of them remarked: "I did not know that so many Jews were Nazis!" And others also seemed to think that the prisoners were all supporters—or at least loyal to—the present German régime.

THE DECLINE OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

I should like to call attention to a very careful and precise *Statistical Study of Free Church Provision and Membership in England and Wales to* 1938, by Mr. Arthur Black (obtainable from him at 14, Castello Avenue, London, S.W. 15, price 3d. post free). The analysis deals only with the four Free Churches (Methodist, Baptist, English Presbyterian and Congregational), but it should be of equal interest to Anglicans and Roman Catholics. What emerges conspicuously is the decline in Church membership and attendance during this century and especially since 1921; and while the author is willing to attribute some of the loss to secessions to the Churches of England and Rome, there is no reason to suppose that the membership of the former has increased at all, or that there has been any appreciable increase in the membership of the latter except by immigration from Ireland. (It would be interesting to know the effect on Irish Catholics, in the second and third generations, of residence in England.) The author gives the basis of his figures very clearly. In the London area, for example (25-mile radius from Charing Cross), he records between 1921 and 1938 a

decrease of 3 per cent. in Church membership and of 30 per cent. in Sunday School scholars. The figures for provincial towns, small towns and rural districts are no more encouraging. As with the Church of England, certain urban districts are over-supplied with churches, while many new housing estates are almost destitute. Even the decrease of the birth-rate (of which the author takes full account) does not explain the extreme decline in the number of children under instruction. I quote the following paragraph, in which the writer's feeling expresses itself by statement of fact:

"An example from the suburban district of my home gives me some understanding of what exists in many another, making some of our hymns, e.g., 'Like a mighty army moves the Church of God,' seem rather farcical. In a circle of half a mile radius of the railway station I have visited 13 Sunday Services, two Church of England, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed Church of England, Brethren, Christadelphian, Christian Science, Christ's Church of the Spirit, and London City Mission. There is good feeling between several denominations, and occasional temporary co-operation. But each independently of the rest emphasises its own distinctive witness and uses its own hymn book. Yet with this too ample choice offered, the district is not drawn to public worship. Sunday attendances on the whole are discouraging and the Free Churches here, as elsewhere, mourn declining numbers."

THE REALITY OF A MIXED SOCIETY

In a small book published a year ago, I attempted a sketch of a "Christian Society" in what I believed to be the only sense in which the whole of society in any country could ever be "Christian." My outline did not on the one hand depict an ideal Christian society, nor on the other was it put forward as a scheme for the direct reorganisation of the society which we have. In our Supplement this week Professor Hodges (who previously contributed the Supplement to No. 27) concerns himself with a different and more immediate and more complex approach to the problem of the relation of the Church and the World. In a world in which Christians must co-operate, not only with each other and with the believers in other religious faiths, but with those who make no religious profession whatever, if any tolerable social order is to be established at all, what common principles of behaviour can be affirmed? This leads to the problem of "natural law"—a problem which presents greater difficulties for the modern world than it did for the Middle Ages. But it is no merely abstract theological and philosophical discussion that Professor Hodges has introduced, but one of the most vital importance for directing Christian social action.

Yours sincerely,

T. S. Eliot

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SOCIAL STANDARDS IN A MIXED SOCIETY

By H. A. HODGES

There have been welcome signs in recent years of a new vigour in Christian thought on social questions. Under the pressure of the world crisis, an increasing number of Christians have begun to ask themselves what bearing their Christian faith has upon our present troubles. Christianity is not only a "gospel" or "good news"; it is also a call to action. It makes demands, and Christians in our time are becoming steadily more aware of these demands. They see increasingly how deep the Christian criticism of current ideas and institutions must go, and how much of the life around us we are bound by our Christian profession to challenge.

THE FACT OF CHRIST

Christianity is a complex and mysterious thing and yet is also simple. It is complex and mysterious, because it deals with every side of human life, which is itself complex and mysterious; and it is simple, because all the twisted strands of its mystery are united and summed up in Christ. Among the rest, this is true of its social gospel. Whatever Christianity may have to say about the relations between men, classes, and communities, we may be sure that it will all depend upon the central fact of Christ. I say the fact of Christ, and not merely His teaching, nor even His example if we mean by that His actions as a man among men. More significant than these is the fact that He exists at all, that in His Person God has taken upon Himself human nature and now wears it for ever; that in this human nature He has undergone suffering and death, and risen again, glorified and arrayed in new powers, in order to impart to mankind something of the life of God. God has done this; and no man must treat human nature, whether in his own person or in that of others, with less respect than God Himself has shown and shows to it. If there is a specifically Christian social philosophy, this is its foundation. There can be no other.

A Christian social philosophy could, in fact, be built up on this basis. Here is a task for those Christians who happen to be philosophers. In discharging it, however, they will soon come up against a difficulty. The man who thinks out a Christian social philosophy will probably let it take shape in his mind as a picture of an ideal Christian society; and, if he stands firmly by his terms of reference, he will mean by this a society in which everyone is a Christian and behaves accordingly, since nothing less than this is the ultimate Christian ideal. But it is an ideal which bears little relation to the facts of our time. It is not the case in any society to-day that everyone is a Christian; it never was (for the Christianity of the so-called Age of Faith was more superficial than is commonly admitted) and it never will be in any foreseeable future. What we have got, and what we are likely to get if the new paganism does not sweep the world, is a society in which Christians, though able to exist and even to exert some influence, are neither the whole nor even a majority of the people. It will be a mixed society; and any ideal which is meant to serve as a practical programme must be framed with this in view.

THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

In such a society, the business of the Christians is to act as a "ginger group."

As such, they must have their ultimate ideal and keep it alive in its purity. But, at the same time, they must have in their minds a different question, viz.: to what pitch of virtue can the conscience of the mixed community be screwed up, and by what kind of appeal can it be influenced? For on the one hand there are many points in the Christian social philosophy with which non-Christians agree, and Christians and non-Christians can work together on the strength of these. But, on the other hand, even where they want the same thing, they often want it for different reasons. The Christian may use various arguments to set his contentions in a persuasive light, but his deepest ground of conviction is always the fact of God in Christ, and the non-Christian does not share this ground. What reasonable grounds are there, then, on which some part, at least, of the Christian social philosophy can be commended to him?

The answer falls into two parts.

COMMON SENSE AND SOCIAL HEALTH

1. Certain conditions must be fulfilled if there is to be a society at all, and the most important of these can be made clear by simple common sense. Thus, there can be no society where there is not a common purpose, for without this the people will not combine. The purpose must involve real benefits for all, and some kind of rough justice in their distribution; for if not, the people will not all be interested, and the society will disintegrate. There must be somewhere an authority which makes decisions, settles disputes, and thinks and acts for the whole; for if not, again the society will disintegrate. The authority must be able to count on the obedience and public spirit of its servants and subordinates, or it cannot function properly; but equally the members of the society must be able to feel that the authority is efficient and well-informed, and acts in good faith for the common good, or else they will not give it the trust and co-operation which it needs. And so on.

Truths like these are patent to all who are willing to see them. If people do not see them, that is due not to lack of learning, but to lack of good will. It is important, however, to recognise just how far these elementary truths can take us. They do not trace out for us the lines of any particular kind of society, which we might take, on their authority, as our ideal. All that they do—and it is important enough—is to tell us on which conditions we can have any sound social life at all. They are like the rules of health which can be deduced from an elementary knowledge of the functioning of the human body. Certain rules I must observe if I am to be in health. If I depart from them, my health will suffer; if I depart from them too far, I shall become ill and die. So with societies: there are certain elementary rules of social health, and the society which breaks them will function badly, will become involved in difficulties and crises, and (if it goes too far on the wrong road) will break down.

2. Rules of health alone, however, will not tell us what kind of life to live. A man may observe them all, and live a life which is quite healthy so far as it goes, while yet failing to make the best of himself, and neglecting his duties to God and man. What is a man's best? It is different for each individual person, depending on his special aptitudes and tastes, and his material and social environment. But for everyone alike (whether he realises it or not) it is better to be unselfcentred than to be selfcentred; for everyone alike it is better to work for a good outside himself, to recognise a duty which claims him, and in whose fulfilment his life finds its meaning. It is best of all (as is recognised even by some non-Christians) if this duty by which he lives is a duty consciously owed to God. And all this applies with equal force to societies. For them, too, it is not enough to know only the bare rules of health. Societies can live and prosper while pursuing very different patterns of life, and each society has to find for itself the pattern which is best for it. But here again there are certain principles which apply to all, though not all are aware of them. The life of a society, too, is on a higher or a lower level according as it and its members recognise or fail to recognise the existence of a good beyond

themselves, and of a duty which they owe to God and man.

THE GROUND OF MORAL WISDOM

Now, truths of this kind are not a matter of everyday common sense, like the rules of health set forth above. It needs more than ordinary practical sagacity to make us see them. It needs a certain moral wisdom, of which perhaps no one is altogether devoid, but which nevertheless varies a great deal in range and delicacy from one person or community to another. And therefore we cannot expect to convince people of these truths merely by proclaiming them and pretending that they are obvious. What is needed is rather a patient and subtle appeal to the imagination. We have to get people to think seriously of forms of life and experience which may hitherto have been outside their horizons. We have to persuade them that these new forms of life are real possibilities for them, and are richer and better than their present modes of life. Only in this way can we hope to win them to the adoption of new and higher standards.

This is a delicate process, and its working must be slow. Yet it is not so slow as it might be, because of a happy illogicality which often makes people willing to accept a moral principle simply because it has caught their imagination, without waiting to see the case for it fully reasoned out. In this way even principles which are native to the Christian insight can be adopted by many who lack that insight itself, and so do not see the real reason for these principles. At the same time, it often happens that truths which a Christian holds because he is a Christian can be reasonably defended on other grounds as well, and so can become embodied in systems of ideas which, as a whole, are not Christian. For instance, the greatest philosopher of modern times, Immanuel Kant—a non-Christian, and a German—expressed what he took to be the fundamental rule of morality in these words: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only." We might paraphrase it thus: "Always treat human beings as persons who have a claim upon you, not as mere tools to be used for your own profit." This is the same principle which I have already set forth on Christian grounds in my second paragraph above, and it cannot be *fully* understood or vindicated except on these Christian grounds. Yet, even if we set Christianity aside, there is still a good deal that can reasonably be said for this principle, and, through being embodied in Kant's philosophy, it has in fact come to be widely accepted among people to whom Christianity means very little. It is a valuable point of contact between Christian and non-Christian, and there are others like it.

THE GROUND OF "NATURAL LAW"

This question of how to find contact with non-Christians is naturally not a new one to Christian thinkers. It has been faced before, and answered in a way which has commanded widespread agreement. The answer most commonly given makes use of the conception of "natural law." This conception has a long history, with which the reader need not be troubled. In its present form, and as applied to the solution of our problem, the doctrine runs as follows. The human mind is not capable, by its own exertions, of grasping the whole truth about God and man. As much as we need to know has been revealed to us by God in Christ, and without the Christian revelation it is not possible for man to discover satisfactorily what is God's will for him and his eternal destiny. This does not mean, however, that outside Christianity there is no knowledge at all on these points. Certain fundamental truths, including the existence and some of the attributes of God, and also the basic principles of morality, can be discovered by "natural reason," which means that even a man who has never heard of Christ, if he is intelligent and honest, can either find out the principles of morality for himself, or at least recognise their truth when they are put to him. These moral principles which can be known in this way by "natural reason" are called the "natural law." They are the same everywhere and always, and even the Christian revelation does not supersede them, but only amplifies them. Here, therefore, is a common ground on which Christian and non-Christian can meet. The

Christian has the light of natural reason, and also something more, viz., the revelation of God in Christ. He is bound to act up to both. The non-Christian has not the special revelation, but he still has the natural law, and he is bound to live up to that. The Christian must remind him of his obligation to obey the natural law; and this is their point of contact.

CRITICISM OF THIS DOCTRINE

This doctrine has an impressive history behind it, and is still widely held among Christians to-day. In particular, it has the authority of the Church of Rome in its support, and is the basis of the moral and social teaching given to the world in a series of encyclicals by several recent Popes. One criticises such a doctrine with diffidence, but I cannot resist the impression that it is too simple, so simple as to be misleading. It does not recognise the distinction, which I have drawn above, between the elementary rules of moral and social health, which are indeed obvious to common sense, and upon which all intelligent and honest persons everywhere and always must agree, and the higher moral and social ideals, which are only to be grasped by a subtle and delicate imaginative perception, easily perverted or inhibited by training and circumstances, and to which, therefore, in varying degrees, vast numbers of men are honestly blind. It lumps together crude horse sense and imaginative understanding under the single name of "natural reason," and combines truths learned from both these sources under the single name of "natural law," without recognising how very much less obvious some of them are than others. As a result, those who hold the doctrine are apt in practice to preach their own conception of morality—a conception built up by Christian thinkers through long centuries of reflection—as if it were a conception which all honest men must accept, and they claim the assent of their neo-pagan audience with altogether too much confidence, not understanding how far their own standards and ideals are the result of their traditions, or how hard must be the task of making them intelligible and acceptable to people whose traditions are different.

It is because this confusion has a bad effect upon Christian tactics that it is worth while to challenge it, and to press home the distinction between the rules of social health and the higher social ideals. It is bad tactics to put forward personal and historically-conditioned insights as if they were obvious matters of fact. We have to try to carry non-Christians with us in both; but the two halves of the task must be attempted in different ways.

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